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ABSTRACT

This guide provides a summary of the information and suggestions covered on an audiotape designed to help students prepare for and take tests. First, introductory material presents a rationale for the development of the testing skills materials and a discussion of their use at Lane Community College. Next, the objectives of the tape are specified and some common types of test questions are introduced. The following sections focus on pre-test strategies, covering getting useful information from the instructor, taking practice tests, studying in ways that will increase memory at test time, allowing a latency period without studying before a test, avoiding physical conditions that slow down the mind, and helping oneself concentrate. Next, techniques are recommended for use during a test, including using scrap paper to jot down key information, surveying a test before beginning, reading questions and instructions carefully, trying to answer multiple choice questions before looking at the options, handling questions when one is uncertain about the answer, watching for key words, remembering information, handling a time limit, changing answers, writing something on essay questions even when very little is known, coping with tiredness and distracting thoughts, spotting clues in questions, and handling mechanical details accurately. Finally, advice is provided for things to do after the test in order to improve performance on the next exam. (HB)

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HOW TO PREPARE FOR TESTS AND TAKE THEM EFFECTIVELY: WHAT THE EXPERTS SAY. AN AUDIO TAPE FOR COLLEGE STUDENTS WITH A DETAILED OUTLINE AND INTRODUCTION

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Many students who have studied their subjects do poorly on tests because they use poor methods to take tests. There are several books available on test-taking skills, and the subject is taught in courses on effective learning. However, the great majority of students do not come into contact with this information. The relatively high price of the slim books on test-taking skills is one deterrent. And another deterrent is that many students do not want to take how to study courses.

It seemed to me that it might be helpful to prepare a short summary of effective test-taking strategies and make it accessible to students. Accordingly, I have made an audio tape that runs about 90 minutes and have written up a detailed outline that accompanies it. We loan out the tapes from the Lane Community College Testing Office (a $2 deposit encourages its return), and students can buy it from the bookstore. Students who would rather read the material can purchase the outline for $0.45 to cover printing costs. And some students both listen to the tape and buy the outline to save themselves the note-taking.

It occurred to me that many educators at other colleges and perhaps at high schools might find this material useful to assist in their own efforts to help their students improve their test-taking skills. Readers are welcome to use the outline as the basis for their own audio tapes if they wish. Some of the popular books are listed at the end of the outline. Added information can be found in some textbooks on tests and measurements.

And I would like to recommend that colleges make how to study material easily available to students. Very often the usual aids offered by counselors, instructors, books, how to study courses, and common knowledge in the culture are not enough. It helps to give away such material free or make it available at low cost. Many students have never thought of using even basic skills, and if they read them even once, they might adopt some effective methods.

At Lane Community College we provide free 15 one-page and two-page study tips on various topics. They range from traditional topics like note-taking and memory techniques to essays on anxiety, motivation, and conquering negative attitudes to school. (See ERIC document ED 219 120.)

We also provide tapes and outlines on several other topics. They were submitted to ERIC at the same time as this outline.

Tapes currently available are:

How to Lower Your Anxiety About Tests.
How to Use the Keyword Method to Memorize New Words Fast and Surely.
How to Teach Yourself Physical Skills.

Other tapes in preparation include: how to conquer procrastination, effective techniques for studying math and science, and effective problem-solving techniques to use on math and science problems.

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**NOTE: This contains notes for a talk recorded on a cassette tape of the same name. These are full notes, but the tape has additional information.

I. Introduction

Goal of talk: I have read several of the books by experts on what people can do to improve their effectiveness in taking tests. I want to share this information with you.

There are quite a lot of techniques. You can learn them and raise your test scores.

Of course, no test-taking skills can ever help you as much as studying honestly and learning your subject.

But if you listen to this advice and put it into action, you will be able to get the most out of your knowledge.

Some Common Types of Test Questions

I want to get you thinking of what objective tests are like, so here's a brief list of common types of objective questions and an example of each one. I used to teach sociology, so most of my examples will be about how groups and cultures influence people.

EXAMPLE: Multiple Choice

"Which of the following are social norms?"

a. An English knight's values on chivalry
*b. Oregon's traffic laws
c. An electrical engineer's knowledge
d. A family's behavior one day at a meal

EXAMPLE: True-false

(T) In America the richest 10% of the people earn 42% of all the money earned each year.

EXAMPLE: Matching

Match the adjective on the left with the name of the appropriate human sense on the right.

Sweet	Sight
Stinking	Hearing
Loud	Touch
Rough	Smell
Bright	Taste
Dizzy	Balance

EXAMPLE: Fill-in-the-blank OR Completion

When people define situations as real, they are _____. (real in their consequences).

BEFORE THE TEST

How to Get Useful Information From Your Teacher

I suggest that you ask the teacher for the learning objectives. You want to know what specific knowledge and skills the teacher expects you to have. You want to know what criteria the teacher looks

for. For example, does the teacher expect students to know facts or theories? To recognize correct answers or to pull them out of memory without any clues? To solve problems? To explain the causes of things or to trace out their consequences? And so on.

Why do you want this? It guides your studying so that you are looking for the specific type of information you need. It saves time because you hunt for and find the specific things you need. It increases your memory because it's a psychological law that people are more likely to remember things that answer their specific questions than they are to remember unimportant things.

What arguments can you use to get your teacher to describe the objectives clearly? After all, teachers sometimes think they are giving away the exam if they tell you their true objectives. They say, "Study everything." You can say that your knowlege of the teacher's objectives means that you are more likely to study until you reach the criterion that the teacher sets down. You won't stop studying accidentally because you thought the skill was not important. (Of course, you don't need to mention the fact that you will probably not study very hard on the skills the teacher does not set as learning objectives.)

You should also ask for old exams. Even if the teacher has changed textbooks, old exams can help you. The questions reveal the teacher's true objectives. They tell you how hard the test will be. They reveal a certain style.

Now don't limit your studying to only those topics because teachers can change test questions. But use the past test as a guide to the objectives of the teacher and to the level of skill and knowledge demanded.

Take Practice Tests

You can help yourself adjust to tests by taking practice tests. Get old standardized tests. You can find them in these commerical books that prepare people for the College Board exams and other national exams. Up to a point, your practice on these tests will help adjust you to any tests. However, if you are already pretty experienced and usually relaxed in taking tests, then this suggestion is not for you.

Some Ways to Study That Will Increase Your Memory at Test Time

1. For the first stage of studying, study in a normal effective way. Read it, try to understand it, interrelate the various parts etc.

2. Then as you learn a topic, ask questions of yourself in review using the question format that the teacher is likely to use on the test. For example, suppose you've just learned that a person's "social status" means the person's position in a group. So you ask yourself, "What is a person's social status?" And give the answer. And ask yourself, "What term means a person's position in a group?" (Note: you start with word and ask for definition, and you ask a 2nd question that starts with definition and asks for word.)

What I'm suggesting is that you test yourself repeatedly WHILE you study. One psychologist found that it was effective for people to spend up to 80% of their study time after they first read the material in doing self-tests!

WHY? If you just study and read, you are merely taking in information. You are not practicing the skill of seeing a question and then going into your memory and getting the information out.

3. Now a trick. If you know you'll have a multiple-choice test with distractors, then pick a few terms that are close in their meanings to the word you are learning and ask yourself if they mean what the new word means. Say No. For example, is a person's social role an example of the person's status? No. Is a status a social value? No.

If you know it'll be a true-false test, make up a quick crude TF item and give the answer. Be sure to make up False items.

WHY should you ask yourself questions with wrong answers? Why should you try to trick yourself? Because the teacher will put distractors into multiple-choice questions. You will see both true and false statements. You may suffer confusion. Part of your job of learning is learning to identify false statements and know they are false. Therefore, you can greatly improve your learning by studying the differences among concepts and facts.

(3a.) Another technique that is very helpful is to ask questions that involve relating general concepts and principles to concrete examples. For example, suppose you've learned the definition of a social status. Ask yourself, "Is a father a social status?" Yes. "Is a rule that a man should financially support his children a social status? No." Ask positive and negative examples. It greatly sharpens your knowledge to relate examples to principles.

Remember: Your teacher will probably test you by using examples.

These techniques are easy to do during studying, but it really helps on the test. Here is what you are accomplishing: you are putting information into your mind with the same pattern that you will use later on the test when you take it out of your mind. That makes it easier to remember. You've already trained yourself on questions and answers.

4. Another method of preparing for tests: Use mnemonic techniques like the keyword method, story mnemonic, link, etc. For example, if you need to remember several scientific formulas or principles, then link them together in a chain using a mnemonic technique. That memorized chain will let you remember ALL of them.

Why does it help in general to use memory tricks? It makes it easier to recall material when you are anxious. If you learn instead by repetition, rehearsal, etc., then when you are anxious and not relaxed, you may not be able to associate to the answers. But with a mnemonic, you've built in a handy-dandy little association method that is easier to remember. You have built a systematic path you can mentally follow from the question to the answer.

I'm not going to describe mnemonic techniques here.

5. See books on memory.
   THE MEMORY BOOK by Lucas and Lorayne
   YOUR MEMORY by Kenneth Higbee
   IMPROVE YOUR MEMORY SKILLS by Francis S. Bellezza

6. Listen to tape on keyword method. "How to Use the Keyword Method to Memorize New Words Fast and Surely."

7. OVERLEARN complex, confusing and fundamental material.

What's that mean? You first study and learn it. And then you study longer on the same material, using different ways of learning it, using different ways to associate to it, using two or three memory techniques, practicing applying it to more examples than you need to.

What is the benefit of overlearning? After all, it's clearly more work to do, and you can think of three objections against doing more work without half trying. In order to understand the benefit you need to remember that when under stress and worry, people tend to forget things they've learned and get confused. Tests are causes of stress and worry. Overlearning new information will prevent forgetting it when you're under stress in the test. It really works. I recommend it -- especially for when you learn complicated things that are easily confused.

7. Suppose your time is limited and you cannot study as deeply as I suggest. What should you do? I have no easy answer. You have to make hard choices. I recommend: Study the material to understand it first. Then ask positive questions of the style: "What is X?" Then practice stating the answers. And try to distinguish similar concepts from each other. That will help the most. If you have time, try asking questions with negative examples and overlearning.

Allow Latency Period of No Studying Before a Test

Fred Anderson has taken more than 75 college-level examinations, with a pass rate of 80%, "without knowing almost anything about the subjects I tested in." I like his book, though I doubt if he was as ignorant about the subjects as he claims.

He recommends that if you've been studying for weeks for a nationally standardized exam, you don't study the day before.

If it's a regular test, study the day and evening before, but rest an hour or two before the exam.

I recommend: If it's just before the exam, just review a few key, complex, hard-to-remember formulas before the test to make them fresh in your mind.

Why? To give yourself a rest.

To permit your unconscious mind to organize things and put your knowledge in perspective.

To prevent you from feeling that your head is swimming with unorganized facts. A rest cleans up confusion, tiredness, overload.

Are there exceptions: Yes. If you're behind, then study.

Avoid Physical Conditions That Slow Down Your Mind

Try to get your mind alert, quick, and attentive. Avoid doing things to your body that drag your mind down and make it slow, sleepy, dull, and unresponsive. Here's a brief list of dangers.

1. Physical tiredness and sleepiness. You should get a normal amount of sleep the night before. The experts all recommend this.

2. Drugs. Marijuana decreases the effectiveness of the short-term memory, and you need that ability for studying and quick response on a test. Other drugs have other effects. Avoid alcohol, too. Did you know that if you drink while studying, it can make it harder to remember that knowledge when sober? Be careful.

3. Sugar, honey, fructose, etc. Sugar products can make you sleepy and dull after about one-half hour of taking them. You probably know already whether you are sensitive to sugar. If you are, avoid it both when you study and before a test.

4. Heavy exercise. It can produce a temporary sleepiness and passivity. (This is not meant to prevent you from doing light exercise that stimulates blood flow and that fills your body with oxygen. Deep breathing and stretching can be helpful.)

5. Being too warm. When many people are warm, they get sleepy and slow down mentally. When they are cool, they function better. If

you are sensitive to temperature, then when you take a test DO NOT wrap yourself in warm sweaters, wool shirts, jackets, etc. Stay dressed on the cool side.

How to Help Yourself Concentrate

Here is a psychological trick to help you concentrate on tests. You need to start setting it up some time before the test.

You start by thinking about a time when you were very intellectually alert, could think clearly, were able to remember well, could work fast and efficiently and accurately. Think about what you saw, heard and felt then. Think about that state of working effectively that you were in. As you begin to remember it, take your right hand and squeeze your left wrist. Squeeze only as hard as you can recall that state of mind. As you remember more and more of that state of working supremely well, squeeze your left wrist again and squeeze it harder.

Then when you want to have access to that state, squeeze your left wrist with your right. You will find that you begin to enter that state of clear concentration. Let yourself flow into it and work out of it. As you practice getting into it, you will make it easier and easier to do it. When you are actually in the test, you can call up your inner resources of concentration by squeezing your wrist.

Of course, you can use another signal. You might touch your right thumb to your right middle finger. Or you might touch your index finger to your ear lobe.

Why does it work? You are conditioning yourself to associate the good state of concentration with the wrist squeeze. It really works!

DURING THE TEST

Jot Down Key Information on Scratch Paper as the Test Begins.

Fred Anderson contributes an unusual suggestion: He asks the examiner for scratch paper and jots down formulas, facts, terms, mnemonic acronyms, and things easy to forget. It has the purpose and benefit of relieving his anxiety, freeing his attention to think about other things, and providing reminders.

It's perfectly legal. Because it's not pre-written notes.

If you can't get scratch paper, use your exam.

How to Start a Test

1. The experts recommend that you quickly survey the test. If it's a long MULTIPLE-CHOICE test or a TRUE-FALSE test, it does NOT mean you read each item. It DOES mean you take 1 to 3 minutes to survey the test, sample a few items, look at the level of difficulty and type of questions. Why do it? It helps orient you to the scope of the questions, their difficulty and complexity, and the length of the test. It starts your unconscious mind working.

2. If you face an ESSAY test, I recommend you read all the questions. Again try to do it in 1 to 3 minutes. Benefit: You'll be able to allocate time, start your unconscious mind working, estimate the difficulty of the task ahead of you.

3. The experts also say to read the directions carefully. Usually, you should look for key words, scoring information, weighting being different on certain sections, and so on.

4. Even if the examiner reads the questions aloud, you should read them silently. Why? One expert tells of a case where they accidentally gave him an older version of a test with a longer time limit. But he never found out because he sat back and listened. So

read the directions. It also helps your mind to take in information two ways: through the eyes and the ears.

5. At the beginning of the test, you should also look at the time limits and calculate how much time you can spend on each question. I'll say more later on about how to handle time limits.

Read Very Carefully the Instructions and the Questions.

***NOTE: There was some research done once on people who were excellent test-takers. More of them listed this advice as a key to their success than anything else.

1. How do you tell if you are reading carefully? Read slowly enough so you get the MEANING of each word and phrase. As you read, you should deliberately think of the meanings of the sentences.

Try to make pictures of the meaning.

Say the meaning in other words. Talk to yourself.

Use a pencil to mark your place to make sure your eyes catch every word -- do this if nervous and jumpy. Why? To make sure to scan every word.

(These extra details are unnecessary if you are feeling relaxed and alert.)

2. Read the directions very carefully. Why? To avoid writing irrelevant essay. To avoid making foolish mistakes -- like a person who was taking a multiple choice vocabulary test that asked him to look for word opposites, but he jumped in and gave synonyms.

Do not skip the directions. Read them!

Read slowly enough that you understand the meaning of everything that your present degree of knowledge allows you to understand.

3. If you are worried and tense, you will be tempted to read fast in order to have time to finish. DON'T! Always read just slowly enough to have full mastery of the meaning.

How to Approach Each Question

1. For all types of questions, the first step is to read them and understand them.

If you face multiple-choice questions:

Then you've got to decide: is it better for you to try to think of the answer before looking at the options? Or is it better for you to read the possible answers first and then try to figure out which is right? The books by the experts say you should try to formulate what the answer should be before looking at alternatives -- if it's the sort of question you can do it on. EX: "What is the capital of Brazil?" You can think of it. Benefit: it prevents you from being suckered in by deceptive options.

Suppose you don't know the answer or you THINK you know but feel unsure: then look at the options right away.

**This advice won't work on certain types of problems: analogies, short stems like "Chlorophyll functions to . . .", "Andrew Jackson is famous for . . ." These stems are so vague that they do not ask you for specific information. So read the alternatives immediately.

2. You should read all of the answer options before you choose one. Why? To prevent yourself from choosing the first good-sounding answer and not reading far enough to see the BEST ANSWER.

How to Handle Questions You Are Not Certain About

1. **VERY IMPORTANT** If you are not certain of the answer, try to rule out answer options that are obviously wrong. Possibly you can arrive at the answer by eliminating all of the others.

2. If you get down to two options, you have a choice. (a) To temporarily leave the question and return to it, OR (b) to guess at the answer.

(a) If you decide to temporarily leave the question and to go on to other questions, do the following to save time and give yourself the best chance of remembering.

** Write down the options that you have not eliminated.

** Ask your mind to hunt for the answer and to give it to you.

(b) If you decide to guess, you can be reassured that your act of eliminating the options that are obviously wrong has increased the odds in your favor.

3. Do you think that two answers are right and that the teacher has made a mistake? I recommend you mark one choice AND write a note to the teacher about that question. Explain why you think two are right, explain your reasoning. You may get part credit by doing this.

4. If you work on a test item that involves problem-solving and you find that it is going to take too much time, you should ruthlessly leave it and go on to others.

Does it hurt your ego to quit something? Do you feel like a failure to leave problems undone? Do you fear mysterious punishments if you stop before being finished? Do you have an irrational belief that if you miss even one question you've failed the exam?

Well . . . get over those feelings and beliefs. Remember the facts about tests: teachers almost always set their grading standards so that people can miss many items and still pass and still get GOOD grades. Your goal is to get the highest grade possible. Therefore, it is sensible to give up on a certain difficult question and move on to questions easier to you.

When you read test questions, watch for KEY WORDS in the stem and alternatives. Absolutes, Qualifiers, Determiners

1. ABSOLUTES: always -- absolutely --necessary -- must -- constantly -- sole -- invariably -- never -- only -- all -- none -- every.

**Example: "T or F. People who are fearful always tend to affiliate with others." False. The word "always" is too strong.

See Anderson p. 28 for more Absolutes.

2. QUALIFIERS: generally -- some -- best -- probably etc. (See Anderson, p. 28)

**Example: "T or F. In general, the more fearful people are, the more likely they are to affiliate with others." True. There are exceptions, but you are supposed to say True.

It is fair to ask your teacher how he or she uses Qualifiers.

3. DETERMINERS: (They give a certain perspective to a statement or to an answer alternative. They ascribe a particular viewpoint or relationship to something.)

-- as judged by -- main advantage -- caused by -- depended upon

etc. (See Anderson, p. 29)

(See Milgram and Pauk on keywords, p. 29, 63-64.)

When you see words like these (and more), pay attention. Think about what they literally and exactly mean. Don't stretch their meaning to make an option fit.

How to Remember Things You Have Studied During a Test

**Suppose you face this problem during a test: You read a question and you sense that you have studied this information and that it may be in your memory. Or suppose you have a problem to reason out and you find it to be difficult at first. How can you have the best chance of retrieving information from your memory or of getting your unconscious mind to figure out how to solve a problem?

1. Say to yourself, "I want to know what the capital of Brazil is." "I want to remember the definition of the functional theory in sociology." "What is Lloyd Warner's explanation for why there are social classes in cities?" You sort of talk to yourself. You feel the desire for the information and you ask yourself to get it.

Then you should deliberately turn your mind away to the next question. While you are consciously thinking of new items, you are unconsciously searching your memory for the answer. If you haven't read much about the unconscious mind, you should study some psychology. It's really there! Very often you will notice later in the test that the answer pops into your mind. Or you'll return to a problem and find it becomes easier to solve.

2. Try to recall any of the concrete things you saw, heard, felt, tasted, and smelled at the time you were learning the information you want to recall. Use all your senses.

For example: Try to remember what chair you sat in when you studied that information, what the book looked like, what you might have been hearing. In general, try to recall any of the surrounding stimuli that were present when you learned that material. You can help yourself before a test by studying a specific topic in a different corner of a room than you usually study in. Or do anything distinctive that will serve as a marker for that material.

Why? People's memories link things together by association, and your memory for a missing fact might be linked to a melody you were hearing on your radio when you learned that fact, to a picture on the page you saw at the time, and so on.

3. Try to check your mind if you know any other material on a related subject. Then think about that familiar material. If the material you temporarily forgot is associated to what you remember, then you may recall by thinking of the familiar material.

That works for the same reason. Memories are linked by association.

How to Handle a Time Limit

Your objective: To answer as many questions as possible. To work as efficiently as possible, avoiding wasted time. To give yourself sufficient time.

1. If an objective test, check how many items and how many minutes. Divide number of items by the number of minutes. For example, 25 items in 50 minutes means 1/2 item per minute. 75 items

in 50 minutes means 1 and 1/2 items per minute.

Then calculate approximately where you should be half-way through the exam.

Then at the half-way point in terms of time, check to see what item you are working on. If you're behind, then speed up. If ahead, then relax. Benefit: keeps you on time.

If an essay test, note the number of essays and the time allotments for each. If a teacher says 10 minutes for one question and 20 minutes for another, the teacher will probably grade the longer essay twice as heavily. Therefore, you should follow the time limit carefully.

2. If you run out of time and still have unfinished test items to do, then take the last 2 minutes and mark down random guesses for the unfinished items. Also guess at items that were too hard for you. You may wonder at the wisdom of guessing; I'll discuss it more later.

3. Handle time by not spending too much time on one question. If you come to a question that is difficult for you, you should work on it long enough to establish that it's resisting you and may endanger your time on the remaining items.

So mark that it's undone and go on to the next item. If you have time at the end, return and work on it. If no time, guess at it.

If it's a multiple choice item and you have enough knowledge to rule out one or two of the answer options, then write down on the test the remaining options that might be correct. How will this benefit you? It means when you return to the item, you won't have to waste time re-thinking why the eliminated options were wrong.

4. If some questions are worth more points than others and you can see that you will be able to do them efficiently, you might work on them first. Benefit: you accumulate points and avoid any danger of running out of time without doing questions you could have worked on.

Anderson cites a study of students who were high-scoring test-takers. The students said that the 2nd most important trait for their success was: Don't spend too much time on one question.

Should You Ever Change an Answer?

Sometimes you may choose an answer, not be certain you were right, and later get nervous about it. You feel uncertain and can think of a reason or two for selecting a different option.

Should you change the first answer? Is the old myth true that "the first answer is always right"?

Psychologists who study people's test-taking behavior have studied this issue. They found that people who changed an answer were more likely to be right than people who didn't change.

One of the writers I studied says you should use this guideline: If you later can think of a very good reason for changing an answer, do it. It should be a reason better than your original reason for choosing the first answer. This will happen when you are doubtful about an answer at first, and later during the test you remember new information or see some logical reason you didn't see before.

If you did your best thinking at first, don't change the answer.

Follow your best reasoning and memory and knowledge at all times. Change answers if you believe you should.

Should You Guess at Answers?

When you are out of time on a test and have some unfinished questions, should you guess?

When you have tried a question for a little while and can't get the answer, should you mark down a guess or should you leave the answer blank?

The answer is almost always Yes, do GUESS!

First of all, use your head on each question. Usually, if you don't know the answer, you do know enough to eliminate one or two distractor options. Then after that you should guess.

Here is why: If it's multiple choice with 4-alternatives, you have a 1 in 4 chance (25%) of getting the answer right. With 5 alternatives, it's 1 in 5 or 20% chance. If you can eliminate even one alternative as wrong, you've got a better chance. Even without any knowledge, you can raise your score one point for every 4 or 5 questions you guess on. With a True-False test, you've got a 1 in 2 chance (50%) of getting it right. If you don't guess, you get nothing. So guess.

You will find that the people who write tests take one of three general approaches to students' guessing.

(1) The first type has no penalty for guessing. You can usually tell because the directions will encourage you to answer every question. And they won't say there is a correction formula for guessing. If there were a penalty for guessing, they'd say so.

(2) A second type has a "correction for guessing" formula. These formulas subtract a certain percentage of the wrong answers from your score. On a 5-alternative multiple-choice test, they'll subtract 20%; on a 4-alternative test, they'll subtract 25% of the wrong answers. But notice: all they're doing is evening out the odds. Unless you guessed several times and got all of them wrong, you wouldn't lose.

And remember that if you know enough to eliminate one or two answer options, you have increased the odds in your favor.

(3) A third type of test actually subtracts all wrong answers from your score and gives you no penalty for unanswered questions. So it's worse to guess than to leave items unanswered. I've only seen one test like that -- The General Aptitude Test Battery. And there are very few.

Don't guess on this kind.

Conclusion: usually it gives you an advantage to answer every single question. So guess.

<u>Should You Write Something on Essay Questions That You Know Almost Nothing About?</u>

Yes.

If you know anything at all, anything, about the topic, write something. Say what you know.

Why? It's so the teacher can give you partial credit. If you have written something, the teacher can give you credit. Even a grade of D on one item is better than an F.

But if you leave it blank, the teacher must give you a failing grade.

Should you guess on essays? Yes. For the same reasons you guess on objective tests. The odds are in your favor that you will get a few more points. And on many essays, if you write a neat, well-organized answer, you will get a substantial amount of partial credit.

So I recommend in general that you write something on all essay questions.

There are exceptions depending on individual teachers' policies.

How to Cope With Tiredness and Distracting Thoughts

1. Tiredness. Use the psychological trick I described earlier to call up concentration.

2. Distracting thoughts. Sometimes people get distracted by intruding thoughts, worries about external things, and so on. Here's how to pull your mind back to the test.

First, talk to the part of you that is generating the thought. It is trying to help you. So say "Thank you for trying to help me by bringing this thought to mind."

Next, you decide for yourself that you want to concentrate on the test alone.

Next, tell that part responsible for the thought that you will deal with it after the test. Promise it a certain amount of time. 15 minutes, an hour, etc. -- whatever you know is right.

Then, go back to the test firmly and resist the temptation to think about that subject.

Finally, after the test is over and you are in a place where you have time to keep your promise, do your thinking or worrying. But keep your promise to that part of yourself. Otherwise, it will learn it cannot trust your promises and will keep trying to make you think these thoughts.

How to Spot Clues in Questions

This advice is for people who don't know the answer to a certain question. You won't need to use it if you know the answer.

Warning: I don't have good examples. You can find examples in the books I'll mention at the end of the tape.

1. Often teachers make the longest answer to a multiple-choice item be the correct one. Why? Because many times it takes them longer to write in the qualifications, exceptions, and details that go in a right answer. A distractor item can be simple, short and grossly wrong. This is true often for definitions and questions about general principles. Teachers often can't resist loading on qualifications to make an answer option true.

**Example:
Which of the following is true?
a. Interaction causes liking.
b. In general, frequent interaction increases the probability that people will like one another, under the conditions of equal status and mutual rewards.
(Note the qualifications underlined.)

2. Often the right answer will be the most general, all-inclusive, most encompassing of possibilities. Often it will have the most qualifications (meaning little exceptions mentioned and ruled out.)
I illustrated this in the last example.

3. If you read the distractors and notice that two of them say the same thing, but that you are required to choose one answer, you've got a clue. Since you can't choose both, it means both are wrong. You can narrow down your search to other options.

**Example:
What does research on anxious people show?
a. They prefer to affiliate.
b. They prefer to wait with other people.

c. They prefer to wait alone.
(Note: a and b mean the same thing. They can't both be right. Reject.)

4. If you read the distractors and notice that two options say the opposite thing, usually it means that at least one of them is wrong. This is helpful if one of the options is "All of the above". Two mutually exclusive options cannot both be right.

**Example:
Which of the following is generally true concerning fear and affiliation?
a. People who strongly desire to know how normal their feelings are about something tend to be likely to avoid others.
*b. People who are afraid prefer people who do NOT look at them very much.
c. People who are fearful prefer people who look at them directly.
d. All of the above
(Note: b and c are opposite. One has to be wrong. Very often teachers embed the answer there. Also the "All of the above" option has to be wrong.)

5. Other easy clues:
a. One question contains the answer to another. Keep alert.
b. The teacher uses grammar that rules out an answer.
Example: "An insect is an"
Mammal Arthropod Chordate etc.
Sometimes the stem calls for a singular answer but you see some distractors with plurals in them. They cannot be right.
c. Absurd options
d. Very difficult English words or foreign words are, if you don't recognize them from the course material, often likely to be distractors. Teachers often throw them in to make an easy distractor when they cannot think of something plausible.
e. Extreme words like All, None, Totally, Never, etc. often signal that a distractor is wrong. Be careful. Many teachers know that students know that unqualified generalizations and extreme statements are often false. So they'll try to trick you. But still if you do not know the answer at all, try ruling out the extreme statements.
6. The books have many more illustrations of this sort of clue to look for.

<u>Handle Mechanical Details Accurately</u>

All the testing books stress that you handle routine details carefully.

If you are supposed to bring pen or pencils or exam book or paper to the test, then do so. Be careful to remember.

If you mark on an answer sheet, fill in your name and date and subject and student number very clearly and carefully.

Make your answer marks heavy, dark, within the spaces. Erase carefully any corrections. Don't make stray marks.

The reason is that many teachers will score your test with electronic scoring machines. These machines are sensitive to stray marks and to unerased answers. They are also unable to read light marks. So if you have light handwriting or if you have a pencil with light lead, please bear down. I work in a Testing Office, and we see problems all the time with students marking too lightly.

Avoid folding or bending machine answer sheets.

Every so often check your place on your answer sheet. Are you answering the same question that you are writing your answer in?

When you finish the test, make a run through to make sure you have placed an answer for every question.

If you have time to review an objective test, reread the questions and check if you marked the answer you meant to mark. By doing this you will pick up mistakes where you meant to mark (b) and instead marked (c). And so on.

If you are taking an essay test, watch the time limit. Teachers usually do their grading in proportion to the number of minutes a question has. So allocate your time accordingly. Give more time to long questions, less time to short ones. Resist your temptation to give more than needed on things you know at the expense of questions that will give you more points.

Stay strictly on the subject.

Reread essay tests. Add those little details that help.

Use neat readable handwriting. It does matter. If the teacher has difficulty reading it, you may be downgraded.

AFTER THE TEST IS OVER

1. Your goal after the test: To use your experience from this test in order to improve your performance on the next one.

Two types of information:

(1) What the teacher asks: type of questions, difficulty, scope and range, complexity.

(2) What you did well on and did poorly on.

Therefore, you should take notes on what was asked so that you will know how to prepare better. Note teacher's apparent learning objectives, type of skills demanded (recognition, recall, problem-solving, etc.). Note which area you had most trouble on.

2. When the test and answers come back, study the teacher's feedback. If you missed material that you know will be prerequisite skills for the next, then study it to mastery immediately. If you missed things that will never return, you can ignore them unless you desire to learn them. If you don't know whether something was a prerequisite skill for later knowledge and skills, then ask the teacher.

3. If you see the teacher's version of the correct answers and if you do not understand why it is correct or why your answer is wrong, you should ask immediately. It is all right to ask respectfully why the teacher thinks an answer is right or wrong. And you can produce a friendly tone of voice. You can avoid a hostile tone of voice.

An honest teacher can either explain the answer or will immediately admit a mistake.

If you have asked and do not get a satisfactory answer and believe that your teacher has treated you unfairly and will not change despite your repeated, courteous attempts to fix it, I recommend you consult our school's Student Bill of Rights. Then protest by using the procedures it describes. You have a right to justice.

Concluding Comments

1. Be gentle on yourself in regard to tests.

Remember that almost nobody is ever perfectly prepared for a test. Almost everybody suffers from the human condition of having to

do too much work with too little time to do it thoroughly and properly. Teachers know this too. They give you margin for error. You can forget things and still pass tests.

2. In regard to my suggestions to you: I recognize that I have suggested so much that you can't put it all into effect -- especially at first. So accept your limits. Start with the one or two or three actions that you believe will most help you and do them. Practice them. After you find they begin working, you can return to your notes and adopt a few more suggestions, and so on.

3. Now let's project ahead into the future. Suppose it's three months from now and you are effectively using some of these techniques. What did you do?

You listened, understood, believed, decided to practice, practiced, corrected your mistakes and repeated your successes, and developed a way to remember to use these techniques on real tests.

Some people listen to a tape like this one, say "That was good," and get up and walk away. When the next test comes, they can't remember what to do.

I wonder what you will do?

Would you ask yourself this question and then think it over and give your honest answer?

** "Is it important enough to me to improve my skill at taking tests to actually adopt and practice some of these techniques?" What's your answer?

Books I Recommend

Fred A. Anderson, HOW TO MASTER TEST TAKING. Aurora, Colorado: Skills Improvement Press, 1981

The American College, TEST WISENESS, 2nd ed. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1978.

Jason Millman and Walter Pauk, HOW TO TAKE TESTS. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1969.

John E. Dobbin, How to Take a Test. Princeton, NJ: Educational Testing Service, 1982.

They are usually available at the LCC Bookstore.

Each has information that the others don't have. So I have no prime recommendation. I used material from each of the three in this talk, and they have much more information I couldn't use because it was too detailed.

You can expect to find how to handle lots of different types of questions -- analogies, number series, essays, and different kinds of objective items. They give hints how to figure out answers from clues given accidentally by the question. Anderson's book and TEST WISENESS are particularly good on this topic.

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